



What's That Smell?

A fragrant dream drew them to St. Martin, but at first the idea just stunk.

BY BILL FINK

→ JOHN BERGLUND AND HIS WIFE, Cyndi, arrived on St. Martin in 2007 with a ridiculous plan. Ridiculous because for the previous 30 years they'd been good corporate employees. Ridiculous because they decided to quit and invest their life savings in a perfume shop. Ridiculous because John's only work experience with scents was in a courtroom, as an attorney. Like most expats John, now 60, and Cyndi, 58, planned to rely on their work ethic. But when they arrived on the island, things got really ridiculous. So they did what anyone would do: toss back rum drinks with locals. That, believe it or not, helped put Berglund's Tijon Custom Fragrances in business.

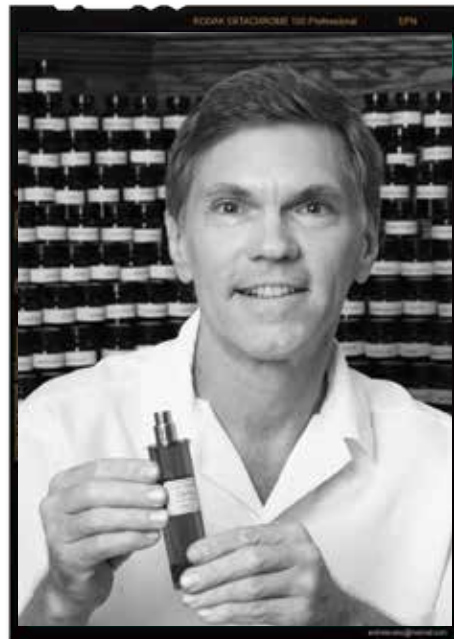
Q: How does an attorney from Minnesota decide to make perfume in St. Martin?

A: Well, it gets cold in Minnesota. Really cold. I'd always dreamed of working where I could just wear flip-flops every day, and my family had loved our trips to St. Martin.

Q: But we aren't just talking St. Martin. We're talking perfume.

A: I studied chemistry in school, and always had an interest in it. At one time I even had my own home lab. But I always wanted to actually make something. Between the cosmopolitan French culture of St. Martin and the scents of local flowers, perfume just seemed like the logical choice.

Q: Interesting logic. You must have chosen St. Martin because you spoke French.



A sense of humor and a few rum drinks helped my wife get through it.

A: Nope. Didn't know a word. We bought *French for Dummies*, but apparently I'm too much of a dummy, because I still don't speak very much of the language.

Q: Doesn't this create some problems trying to run a business in a French territory?

A: Well, we had some early issues using Google translate. In one of my first stabs at a brochure, I wrote what I thought was a compliment, that "the locals like dogs." But it actually said "the locals are like dogs."

Q: How'd that go over?

A: Well, a bilingual friend caught the error before we released it to the public.

Q: That was lucky.

A: Yes, and that's key, developing local relationships to help you get by. Helpful neighbors and friends have saved us more than once. The slogan is right: St. Martin really is "the friendly island."

Q: And does that friendliness extend to the French bureaucracy, specifically with those business permits?

A: The truth is, I hadn't really researched this all the way through.

Q: What do you mean?

A: I missed the fact we needed business permits.

Q: Wait. Weren't you an attorney?

A: Yes, and I also overlooked our residency permits. And a lot of the paperwork that goes with them.

Q: You'd already invested your life savings at this point, right?

A: Yes, to an island where you need your kids' birth certificates just to open a bank account. We had months of work ahead of us, and

I'm not even talking about the act of actually making the perfume, marketing and selling it.

Q: How'd your wife take all that?

A: Disgruntled, to put it lightly.

Q: How'd you manage to fix things?

A: I had to apply every skill I learned from 30 years' experience as an attorney and government lobbyist.

Q: To your wife or to the permit people?

A: Both. A sense of humor and a few rum drinks helped my wife get through it; she's a trouper. And once again some generous local friends helped us deal with all the bureaucratic hurdles.

COURTESY JOHN BERGLUND; OPPOSITE: ZACH STOVALL

Q: So you were good to go. Ready to change the smell of St. Martin.

A: We got the permits. But then we both got dengue fever.

Q: Seriously? You had to think about giving up at this point.

A: It was a rough week or two. But it sure made us appreciate the island's health-care system. I think we paid a total of \$35 for our care.

Q: That's a "looking on the bright side."

A: I remember visiting my dad in hospice care years ago, and realizing how fleeting our time is on Earth. You need to follow your dreams. I get people visiting my shop all the time telling me they wish they could do something like I've done, and I tell them they can. They just need the courage to go for it.

Q: So we all should follow your example?

A: Well, I'd suggest doing a little more research than I did before deciding to invest your life savings. But if I can make it work, anyone can.

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Brace for ...

TIPUNCH

We started drinking it because it's the local thing to do. We continued drinking it because it's the least expensive alcoholic drink. Now we drink it because we actually like the taste.

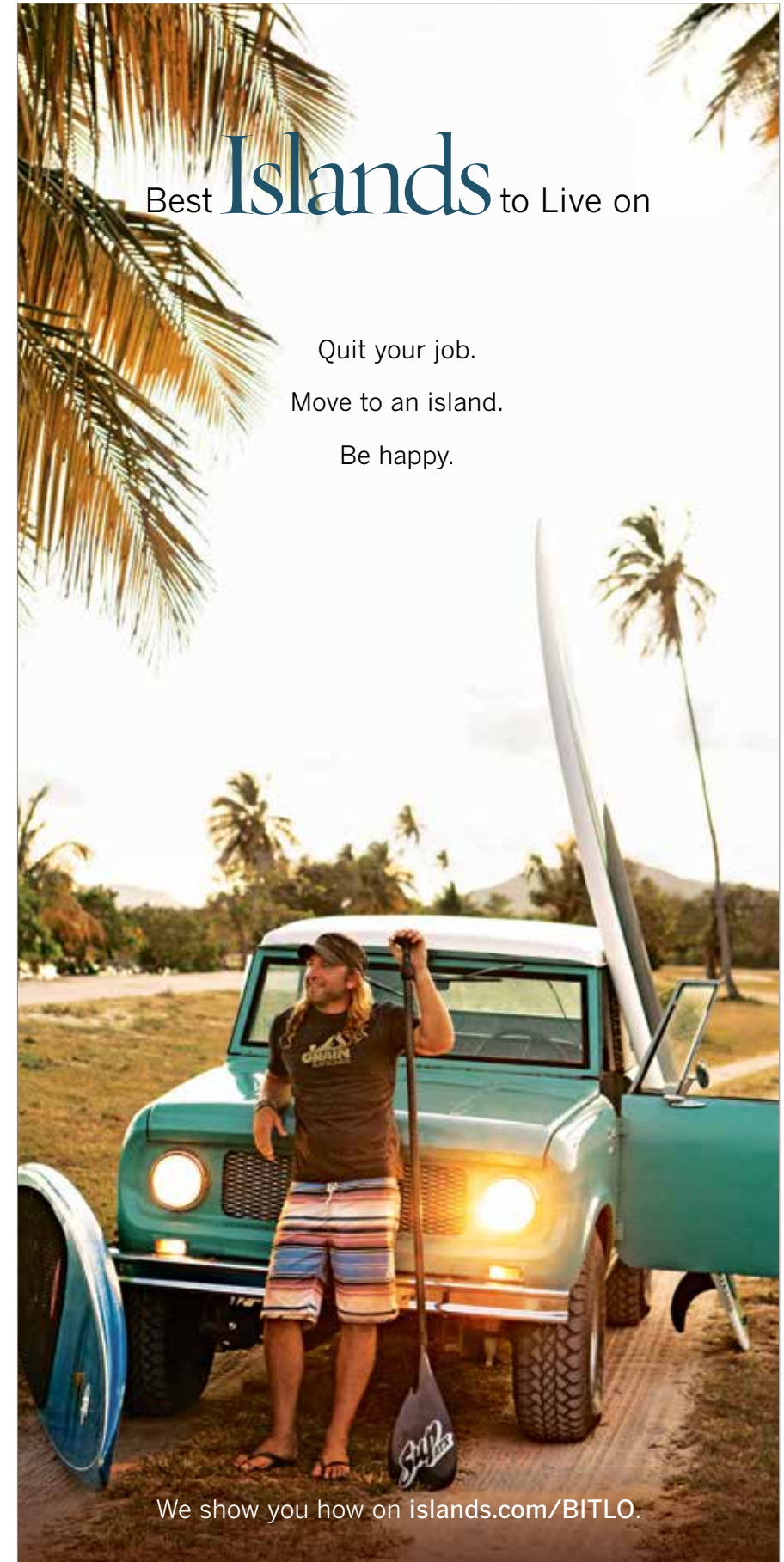


ELECTRICIANS

There are like five qualified guys on the whole island, and they know it. You can't get mad when they don't show up, because you need them. They've got their own little monopoly. It used to bother us, but now we just recognize that it's part of island life.

THE SLOW WALK

It sometimes takes us an hour to walk just a couple of blocks across town, having to say hello and chat with everyone we pass along the way. Some visitors to the island complain about the slow pace of things, but it's what makes the lifestyle here so satisfying.



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